



A STUDY ON THE DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS OF ENGLISH-MAJORED SOPHOMORES AT TAY DO UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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Abstract:

The research entitled “A study on the difficulties in writing argumentative essays of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University” was conducted with the purpose of pointing out some common difficulties of sophomores in writing argumentative essays. The participants of this study were 90 English-majored sophomores of course 13, and two teachers who teach English language at Tay Do University. In this study process, questionnaire and interview were used as two instruments to collect the data. The results of the research would show that English majored sophomores met difficulties in term of linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar and coherence), organization and development of an argumentative essay, and the lack of critical thinking.

Keywords: English, writing, argumentative essay, sophomore, university, linguistic competence

1. Introduction

Chapter 1 presents the rationale, the aim and the significance of the study, and the organization of the study.

1.2 Rationale

In today's global world, language plays an important role in human life. Out of all the languages in the world, English is considered the international language to exchange information with other countries. In Vietnam, English is one of the necessary requirements for many people, especially students who want to have good jobs with a high salary or get a promotion in their careers.

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As an international language, English is not only for communication but also for the academic requirement. To master English language effectively, the language learners need to develop four skills of English: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Of all the four skills, writing has always been considered as a crucial skill in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. It is more and more important to learn this skill because English writing is widely used in international organizations and trading for business correspondence, advertisements, job applications and business reports. Besides, writing is one of the important and integral parts of any tests or exams; thus, if students have excellent English writing skills, it will be easy to successfully pass all their academic courses. Moreover, they will have more opportunities when applying for any jobs compared to the other students especially in private companies that involve an international level. Additionally, writing itself is an important skill because it helps language learners to stimulate thinking and organize their ideas. Furthermore, it increases learners' ability to summarize, analyze and criticize (Rao, 2007).

Within the university environment, students have to deal with various types of written discourse including narration, description, exposition, and argumentation. In short, an argumentative essay is one of the most important genres in academic writing, especially at the university level. In fact, argumentation plays a significant role because it is one of the indispensable soft skills in our life. Having a good argumentative ability brings us a lot of advantages. In academic settings, argumentative writing is an essential tool for students who have to write persuasively to make other people accept their point of view on a particular topic. For test-takers, an argumentative essay is a required genre to produce in different tests or exams such as CEFR tests, TOEFL, IELTS, etc. In the workplace, individuals may try to persuade others to support their proposals or opinions. Obviously, competence in argumentative writing is especially vital for university students. However, argumentative writing has been confirmed by researchers to be the hardest model in writing (Ferretti, Andrews-Weckerly & Lewis, 2007; Neff-van Aertselaer & Dafouz-Milne, 2008). As English-majored students, we realize that English-majored students still cope with some difficulties in writing argumentative essays. Students do not know how to write a good argumentative essay. To clarify, they could not write clearly, orderly, convincingly, and write an essay without the audience's awareness, clear supporting evidence, and refutation. Besides, linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar, and coherence) and background knowledge are also factors that influence students' writing ability.

Being aware of students' difficulties in writing argumentative essays, some previous researchers have investigated and found various difficulties in writing argumentative essays that students often encounter, for example, Rahmatunisa (2014), Zhu (2001), Ka-kan-dee and Kaur (2014). However, there are few studies investigated on difficulties of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University encounter in writing argumentative essays has been conducted. For this result, the research entitled "*A study on the difficulties in writing argumentative essays of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University*" was conducted to explore deeply the reasons and help the English learners in

general and the sophomores majoring in English at Tay Do University, in particular, realize their own obstacles in writing argumentative essays. Hence, the researcher hopes that students can improve their writing skill positively.

1.3 Research aims

The aim of this study is to find out the difficulties in writing argumentative essays of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University. Besides, this study is expected to help students restrict their difficulties and improve their writing skill positively.

1.4 The significance of the study

The study was conducted to point out the difficulties in writing argumentative essays of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University. It helps learners realize their barriers in the writing process. Also, the findings may be useful for teachers in teaching and assessing students' writing competence. Furthermore, based on the problems mentioned in this study, some solutions would be recommended to solve the problems and to help students constructing an effective argumentative essay. Lastly, it will provide valuable information and make suggestions for later research concerned.

1.5 The organization of the study

The study consists of five chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature review

Chapter 3: Research methodology

Chapter 4: Results and discussion

Chapter 5: Conclusion, implications, limitations, and recommendations

2. Literature Review

This chapter consists of five sections. The first section states the definitions of writing and its importance. The second section presents the definitions of essay and the basic structure of English essays. The third section indicates the definitions of an argumentative essay. The fourth section analyzes the difficulties in writing argumentative essays and the final section mentions previous studies.

2.1 Definitions of writing and its importance

2.1.1 Definitions of writing

The experts provided various definitions of writing. According to Rivers (1981), "*writing is conveying information or expression of original ideas in a consecutive way in the new language*" (p.294). As Brown (2001) claimed that "*writing is a thinking process. Furthermore, he stated that writing can be planned and given with an unlimited number of revisions before its release*" (p.336). Meanwhile, Elbow (1973) showed that writing is a two-step process. The first process is figuring out the meaning and the second process is putting the meaning into

language. Writing represents what we think. It is because the writing process reflects things, which stay in the mind. Students who are reluctant to write things down often suffer for this activity. The students find difficulties when they start looking for some reasons to write and producing written sentences.

Based on those definitions, it can be stated that writing is a complex activity in producing qualified writing. Nunan (2003) indicated that writing is both a physical and mental act. At the most basic level, writing is the physical act of committing words or ideas to some medium. On the other hand, writing is the mental work of inventing ideas, thinking about how to express them, and organizing them into statements and paragraphs that will be clear to a reader. In addition, Abu Rass (2015) stressed that writing is a difficult skill for native and nonnative speakers alike because writers must balance multiple issues in their writing such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary and mechanics which means using the right punctuation, spelling and capitalization. Similarly, Byrne (1988) and Heaton (1990) also pointed out that writing is a complex process because it requires the mastery of grammatical devices, conceptual thinking and judgmental elements. As for Kassem (2017) mentioned that writing is an exceptionally complex course, which requires control over a broad variety of tasks ranging from letter formation and spelling to effective use of rhetorical patterns.

In conclusion, writing is a productive activity in which the writer uses his or her own language to express, analyze, prove or convince about the specific topic in a structured form.

2.1.2 The importance of writing

Writing is one of the important skills which have to be mastered by the students because writing can help them to think critically and deeply to build good writing. Writing is also a necessary component of education, livelihood, and functional basics in our society. By learning writing, the students will get knowledge on how to write effectively, how to express ideas, how to share their thoughts with anyone else through writing. Sajid and Siddiqui (2015) also mentioned in their study that writing is widely acknowledged as a major skill for learners to enhance their educational performance. Likewise, Alfaki (2015) claimed in his research that writing is one of the significant language skills. It plays an essential role in conveying an individual's notions, thoughts, views, as well as attitudes. With writing, individuals are able to share notions, emotions, persuasion, and convincing other individuals.

Furthermore, writing is also used as a tool for learning language forms, in addition to a way of communicating. Language instructors can include both types into their lectures and they can also form classroom activities which entail both communication and language forms. Writing can help learners form their ideas more clearly and help them to organize those ideas. Writing is considered as a flexible instrument, which additionally helps learners to remember as well as share thoughts or ideas (Graham et al., 2008).

On the other hand, Mehrabi (2014) mentioned that writing needs a deeper knowledge of the grammatical structure in comparison to the receptive skills and possibly even than speaking. Writing, in both practical sense as well as the communicative sense, involves distinctive attributes, which results in distinct inputs to overall language learning. Writing anything to be educated helps students rehearse and practice the material and save it in long-term memory. Though viewing the language in a written form is not necessary for some learners, for some individuals, grammar, vocabulary, as well as patterns, are simply learned through writing as well as looking at what those individuals are to be taught. Writing is significant; hence, it is the core of communicating clear thinking. The improvement of writing skills is considered as a challenging, complex, and additionally dynamic cognitive process since it needs more than mastering of vocabulary besides linguistic ability.

2.2 Essay

2.2.1 Definitions of essay

In the Preface of *Collected Essays* by Huxley (1923), the author commented that "*the essay is a short piece*". Langan (2004) showed a simpler definition of "essay" by comparing between "a paragraph" and "an essay"; the author claimed that "*an essay does the same thing a paragraph does*". However, the difference is "*a paragraph is a series of sentences about one main idea or point, while an essay is a series of paragraphs about one main idea or point called the central idea*". Zemach and Rumisek (2005) also described that an essay is a group of paragraphs written about a single topic and central main idea. It must have at least three paragraphs, but a five paragraphs essay is the common length for academic writing. Thus, it is required to create an essay which consists of an overall thesis statement and three supporting paragraphs beginning with a topic sentence. Similarly, Oshima and Hogue (1981) claimed that "*essay is a piece of writing consisting of several paragraphs that cover of an introductory paragraph, a body, and concluding paragraph*" (p.76).

Through the previous researchers' view about definitions of essay, we can draw a conclusion that essay is a short piece with several paragraphs written about a topic in which the writer expresses his or her opinions or tries to make certain points using details and facts to support each idea or opinion.

2.2.2 The basic structure of English essays

Although there are many types of essays, they have a similar format. According to Langan (2004), there are three parts in an English standard college essay, also known as a one-three-one essay or five-paragraph essay: Introductory paragraph, Body with supporting paragraphs, and Conclusion. He presented an overview of the traditional form of the essay through the following table.

Table 1: Basic structure of English essays (Adapted from Langan, 2004)

Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open remarks to catch the reader's interest - Thesis statement
Body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Topic sentence 1 (supporting point 1) - Specific evidence
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Topic sentence 2 (supporting point 2) - Specific evidence
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Topic sentence 3 (supporting point 3) - Specific evidence
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Summary - General closing remarks

2.3 Definitions of argumentative essay

There are a lot of definitions of argumentative essay mentioned by different researchers. White & Billings (2008) defined an argument as "a form of discourse in which the writer or speaker presents a pattern of reasoning, reinforced by detailed evidence and refutation of challenging claims, that tries to persuade an audience to accept the claim" (p.4). Argumentation requires one to be able to take a stand, foresee the audience opposing ideas, have the ability to refute those ideas as well as convince the reader to trust that stand with sufficient supporting evidence (Chase, 2011).

Moreover, according to Oshima and Hogue (2006), an argumentative essay can be defined as an essay in which writers agree or disagree with a particular issue and afterwards, they use reasons to support their opinion. When students write an argumentative essay, they should be able to provide "the clear and logical presentation facts (premises) so as to arrive at valid conclusions". An argumentative essay is also defined as "a paper grounded on logical, structured evidence that attempts to convince the reader to accept an opinion, take some action or do both" (Reinking, Hart & Osten, 1993, p.140 as cited in Zhu, 2001).

Writing an argumentative essay is more challenging because producing an argument is more cognitively demanding than producing narrative (Crowhurst, 1990). In argumentative writing, the writer holds a position on a controversial issue, provides reasons and opinions, clarifies, and illustrates those opinions to persuade the audience to agree or disagree with an issue (Reid, 1988). Applebee (1984) defined argumentative writing in a narrow perspective as "the writing that has a hierarchical, analytic structure and requires critical arguments to be systematically supported" (p. 87). Also, Connor (1987) gave a broad definition of argumentative writing: "written persuasive discourse integrates the rational and affective appeals and the appeals to credibility" (p.185). Choi (1988) defined argumentative writing as "one kind of writing whose main purpose is to persuade the reader to accept the writer's belief or opinion" (p.17).

Based on the definitions above, it can be indicated that an argumentative essay is a kind of essay organized around a clear thesis statement. The purpose of writing is to argue the controversial topic or issue to convince readers to accept or agree with the writer's point of view. To achieve the goal of argumentative writing, the writer takes a

position or makes a claim (thesis) and provides reasons and evidence to support his claim/point of view or position with logical arguments, and refute possible counter-arguments.

2.4 The difficulties in writing argumentative essays

In the process of learning language, writing is not an easy skill. According to Umar and Rathakrishnan (2012), writing is the most difficult language skill to master for first as well as foreign language learners. In particular, writing an argumentative essay is one of the most common types of assignments set in the university and it is considered a big challenge for students. Most students struggle with various difficulties in writing argumentative essays. Therefore, the following sections will present some difficulties in writing argumentative essays based on the literature of previous studies.

2.4.1 Linguistic competence

One of the most important parts assisting students to access to writing subject efficiently is linguistic competence. According to Brown (2000), the definition of language competence as *"one's underlying knowledge of system of a language its rules of grammar, its vocabulary, and all the pieces of language and how those pieces fit together"* (p.31). Thus, linguistic competence consists of lots of elements such as grammar, vocabulary, coherence, etc.

2.4.1.1 Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is viewed as an essential tool for mastering any language skills; it also contributes to the understanding of written and spoken texts. Wilkins (1972) wrote that *"...without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed"* (p.111-112). It means that even someone has good grammar, but it will be useless if they do not know many vocabularies. Therefore, acquiring a deep and rich vocabulary knowledge-base can help students to convey their message more efficiently. However, the lack of vocabulary knowledge is a huge obstacle for students. Learning vocabulary does not only mean learning the meaning of new words but also know their functions and applicability to different contexts and situations. Thus, students often have problems in identifying suitable words when they write.

2.4.1.2 Grammar structure

Grammar plays an indispensable role for students in learning foreign languages as well as in writing subject. If the students do not have enough knowledge about grammar and do not get the grammar's rules, they will have problems with using appropriate sentences, resulting in readers's misunderstanding. Rajoo (2010) argued that grammar also plays an important role in students' mistakes. It is because students sometimes produce a sentence without considering the grammar. According to Philips (1979), good grammar will help students produce a high-quality essay. Grammar strategies include how to make a good structure, how to link the paragraph, how to make the clear explanation of each body

paragraph, and also how to make the consistent content with the essay topic. Therefore, if students have good knowledge of grammar, they will easily know how to create grammatically correct sentences by using different and appropriate structures.

2.4.1.3 Coherence

The term coherence can be defined in some ideas. The word "coherence" has the same meaning as sticking together in a logical way. Then, Jones (2007) indicated that *"writing is coherent if the ideas flow smoothly from one sentence to the next sentence and the parts of the text logical relate to one another"* (p.134). Similarly, coherence is a logical arrangement of ideas within a written work in which every stated idea is connected to one another. The logical arrangement and connection of ideas would help readers understand as well as follow the ideas stated in a written work easily (McCrimmon, 1984; White, 1986; Jones, 2007; Oshima & Hogue, 2006; Harmer, 2007). According to Gao (2012), coherence is constructed by three aspects, cohesion (lexical and grammatical links), plausibility or interpretability (semantic association between the old and the new information) and justifiability (logic).

However, the lack of coherence is a major problem in student's writing as students are not able to link their ideas together in the sentences and paragraphs. According to Pilus (1996), *"incoherence is a recurring problem in the students' writing and can be a major obstacle to their success in writing classes"*. Particularly, to produce a good argument, the writer needs to use transitions in order to achieve coherence in their writing. By using appropriate transitions, their ideas will flow smoothly one after the other (Bram, 1995). Therefore, when writing an argumentative essay, some elements such as claims, reasons, examples or evidence must be well linked one to another. It is helpful and useful for the readers in their flow of thinking. If the ideas go here and there without any focus, the thesis gets blurred and readers cannot understand the ideas that we write.

2.4.2 Background knowledge

Background knowledge is an extensive term to describe different kinds of knowledge. According to Proverb (1990), general background knowledge includes knowledge of target culture, knowledge of the topic under discussion, and general world knowledge of current affairs, arts, politics, and literature. Similarly, Brody (2001) claimed that *"background knowledge refers to concepts, experiences, information, and text structures that are relevant to a text under study"*. Knudon (1992) suggested that students should be encouraged to write an argumentative essay with the topic they are knowledgeable about. He also noted that *"a lack of background knowledge will result in student's making unsupported claims that may or may not be logical connected to the proposition, warrant, or opposition"* (p.176). Thus, background knowledge is very important for students in writing argumentative essays. If students do not have enough knowledge, they cannot express their thoughts or opinions about new topics or issues.

Besides, the effect of mother tongue on English writing is one of the obstacles for students. According to Wang and Wen (2002), Language used as the second language (L2)

writers obviously get stuck when writing in the target language because their mother tongue majorly affects the use of the second language; consequently, they may at times combine the systems of the two languages in their L2 writing, which is called “*language transfer or syntactic transfer*”. This is considered a severe problem of L2 writing as Fromkin et al. (2003) stressed that L2 learners are so dependent on the Language used as the first language (L1) syntactic properties that they transfer some L1 grammatical rules in their L2 writing, eventually causing such errors. In short, students always use their L1 to think and plan their writing and then transfer their L1 thoughts to L2. Thus, students often make mistakes in vocabulary, grammar structure and word order when writing.

2.4.3 Organization and development of an argumentative essay

According to Bean and Johnson (2007), argumentative writing is undeniably a very complex form of writing. In writing argumentative essays, students do not understand the structure of the argumentative essay and the function of each part of the essay, so they write in an unclear and unstructured manner. Similarly, Tiryaki (2011) showed that the low quality of argumentations in argumentative essays cannot be separated from the low understanding of the essay structure and the sharpness of the argument. Correspondingly, many students have difficulty finding ideas for essays. They cannot develop ideas and do not know how to organize them properly.

2.4.3.1 Introduction

The introduction is where the writer presents a brief description of the issue. It usually starts by a hook to catch readers’ attention at the first time reading. According to Smalley and Ruetten (1986), an introduction is used to introduce the topic which needs to be discussed and the central idea, which is also called as the thesis statement in an essay. In argumentative essays, thesis statements are classified into two types: debatable and non-debatable. Debatable means a point of view which people might or might not agree with, while non-debatable refers to a thesis with no one disagrees with (Bailey, 2003). The thesis statement is very important because it tells the reader what they will be reading. Setyaningsih and Rahardi (2017) emphasized that an argumentative essay must have a thesis statement. Without the presence of a proper thesis statement, it is impossible for a writing to be a correct argumentative writing. Therefore, the thesis statement should be clear and concise so the reader can identify it and efficiently understand the main idea of the essay. However, one of the core problems students have with writing is that they are not able to write a clear, understandable and strong thesis statement.

2.4.3.2 Body

Every paragraph in this part should be organized according to a logical manner. According to Meyers (2005), this part also aims to develop and to support the thesis by breaking it down into smaller ideas. Langan (2010), every supporting paragraph in the body of the essay should start with a topic sentence. Likewise, according to Hogue (2008, p.38), the topic sentence also tells readers “*what they are going to read about*”. Each point in

a paragraph should then be supported with logical reasoning and evidence from reliable sources (Whitaker, 2009). Effective connection of sentences thus would imply the significance of good language use. Batteiger (1994), when writing the body paragraphs, one should “*provide evidence, reasons and reasoning*” to support your initial stance (p.40).

Nevertheless, when writing an argumentative essay, students often do not provide enough proof or evidence to clarify their arguments. If students want to write a good essay, they need strong evidence to support their ideas. According to Fulwiler (2002), the evidence is the information that supports a claim and persuades others to believe you. Thus, providing evidence is an essential part of argumentation, without showing any proof, convincing a reader of your appeal would prove to be an arduous task. It is at this stage that persuasive appeals are to be addressed for the readers to believe one's stance (White & Billings, 2009). In the body section, students often meet difficulties in writing the counterargument paragraph. A counterargument is an opposing viewpoint. You think about what people on the other side of the issue would argue. Then, you offer a refutation. It means that you refute the other viewpoint and explain why it is wrong. However, recent studies have found that counterarguments become the most difficult obstacles that students face when writing an argumentative essay. Contrell (2005) also pointed out that most of the students do not provide opposing arguments and even ignore them.

2.4.3.3 Conclusion

Writing the conclusion in the essay is as important as writing the introduction. It helps readers summarize the writer's point of view and understand the issue the writer is arguing. This part usually restates the thesis statement and summarizes the main idea. Cottrel (2005) claimed that the conclusion should be clear and based on the evidence. In other words, the conclusion must summarize all reasons and evidence to settle the writer's point of view. However, students do not restate the thesis statement clearly at the beginning of the paragraph. The conclusion does not briefly summarize the main ideas. According to Siwaporn (2010), the conclusion is often missed or ignored by students, and it can lead to a bad impression on the professor.

2.4.4 Critical thinking

Critical thinking is an important and indispensable factor in writing argumentative essays. According to Oshima and Hogue (2006), the best way to investigate the students' critical thinking ability is through their argumentative essays. Since, according to Kuek (2010), in argumentative writing, a writer analyzes, evaluates and counter-arguments and presents logical opinions or facts to convince the readers in which those activities categorized as critical thinking skills.

Moreover, analyzing arguments, making inferences using inductive or deductive reasoning, judging or evaluating, and making decision or solving problems are the components skills covered in critical thinking (Lai, 2011). As a result, it is clear that critical thinking should be possessed by the students in order to write effectively. Whenever the

students are able to think critically, they will easily gather and construct ideas to support their opinion and arguments by selecting proper strong and convincing reasons. However, students who have critical thinking skills are those who are able to demonstrate the ideas not based on their emotion or prejudice, but those who use logical reasons to analyze and argue the points to support their thesis statement. In order to have a good argument in the essay, students need to gather the reasons and evidence carefully. Chain (1986) pointed out that students' critical thinking ability is low. Students never take their own genuine ideas of a topic as well as they rarely have powerful ideas to convince the readers.

2.5 Previous studies

Rahmatunisa (2014) investigated "Problems faced by Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in writing an argumentative essay" with the purpose of finding out problems in writing argumentative essay faced by Indonesian EFL learners. The participants were the second-year of University Indonesia students who enrolled in their study in the English Department. The researcher used a qualitative method by using interview and university students' writing task. Results of this study indicated that Indonesian EFL learners faced problems in three categories, those are linguistic problems, cognitive problems, and psychological problems. Mostly, students faced problems in linguistics related to the grammatical structure (23.2%), formatting words (30.2%), words classes (16.3%), error in using words (9.3%), and the use of articles (21%). Second, cognitive problems are related to organizing paragraph, difficulties in remaining word classes, getting lost the generic structure, making a conclusion, and putting punctuation. Last, psychological problems which included laziness, egoism, bad mood, and difficulties to start writing also faced by Indonesian EFL learner. Data analysis also indicated the problems-solving which hopefully will be beneficial for EFL teachers in writing class.

The other study was conducted by Ka-kan-dee and Kaur (2014). Their research aimed to find out the difficulties that Thai EFL English major students experienced when writing an argumentative essay. The participants in this study were 60 fourth-year English major students who were enrolled in the Advanced Composition Writing course from two selected public universities in Thailand for the academic year 2013/2014. In the study process, think-aloud protocols and semi-structured interviews were used as two instruments to collect the data. The findings of the study revealed that the main difficulties faced by Thai EFL English major students were vocabulary, grammar structure, the structure of argumentative writing, providing solid evidence, time constraints, organized ideas, fulfilling task demand, understanding the questions, L1 transfer and translating, writing the thesis statement, interpreting the questions, pacing, evaluating, topic choice and length. Vocabulary and grammar structure have been regarded as the main barrier in writing argumentative essays in the Thai context.

Moreover, Zhu (2001) examined the difficulties a group of Mexican graduate students encountered when engaged in an argumentative writing task as well as their writing processes and strategies. Data were collected from individual interviews with the

participants and participants' written essays. He revealed that the organization and development of arguments became major challenges that the students encounter in writing their argumentative written work. Another study of Al-Abed-Al-Haq and Ahmed (1994) found that quantity (completeness and balance in arguments and counterarguments), argumentativeness (development, support, organization, and the persuasiveness of the argument), and thesis (clarify and qualification of the thesis and the direction the thesis provides for the reader) were the most difficult areas for the Saudi students.

Through these studies, we could realize that writing argumentative essays is a big challenge for students in academic writing. The results of these studies also indicated that the difficulties students faced in writing argumentative essays consist of a lot of aspects such as linguistics, background knowledge, organization and development of arguments. As a result, students could recognize their difficulties and limit mistakes in writing argumentative essays.

3. Research Methodology

Chapter 3 includes research questions and hypothesis, research design, participants, instruments, and procedure of the research.

3.1 Research questions and hypothesis

3.1.1 Research questions

To find out the difficulties that English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University usually meet in writing argumentative essays. This research was conducted to deal with the research questions:

- 1) Do English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University meet difficulties in writing argumentative essays?
- 2) What difficulties do they encounter in writing argumentative essays?

3.1.2 Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that the English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University could face some difficulties in writing argumentative essays. These difficulties could be problems about linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar, and coherence), background knowledge (including lack of prior knowledge and the effect of mother tongue on English writing), organizing ideas, and lack of critical thinking.

3.2 Research design

The research was carried out to find out the difficulties that English-majored sophomores had faced in writing argumentative essays. The reliability and validity of the research results were based on the instruments. To achieve the mentioned purpose, the sophomores majoring in English were chosen as the sample to the survey. The data from the participants would be collected through the questionnaire and interviews. The

collected information from these two instruments would be analyzed to show the difficulties in writing argumentative essays of English- majored sophomores at Tay Do University. This study was a combination of quantitative and qualitative research.

3.3 Participants

The participants of this study were 90 English-majored sophomores of course 13 at Tay Do University. They were selected randomly. The ages of the participants were from 19 to 21. They were both male and female. They came from different areas, both rural and urban. They speak Vietnamese as their mother tongue and English is considered as their foreign language. They would be given the questionnaire and interview in order to get information about the difficulties they had faced in writing argumentative essays. This helped to provide evidence that made this research more reliable.

In addition, two teachers who taught English at Tay Do University were invited to the teachers' interview to give their opinions about their students' difficulties in writing argumentative essays. They were all female and taught students of English 13 class language skills and academic subjects in recent years.

3.4 Instruments

To achieve the purpose of the study, the researcher used the questionnaire and interviews to collect the students' ideas about their difficulties in writing an argumentative essay and teachers' opinions about their students' obstacles in the writing process.

3.4.1 Questionnaire

A questionnaire was considered as a very useful instrument used to collect data. Therefore, the questionnaire was used as one of the research instruments. In the questionnaire, the students were asked to read and check their responses in the options which fit their opinions.

The questionnaire had 2 parts. Part A consisted of 8 questions which investigated students' background. They dealt with students' hometown, years of learning English, the ability of writing and so on. Part B included 25 statements in total and they were designed in the form of a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, no idea, disagree, and strongly disagree). In general, the questionnaire was classified into the following table.

Table 2: Summary of the question's / statement's content

Question/Statement		Summary of the question's/ statement's content
Part A	Question 1 to 4	- Student's background in learning English.
	Question 5 to 8	- Student's attitudes and opinions towards writing skill.
Part B	Statement 1 to 11	- Students' difficulties in term of linguistic competence.
	Statement 12 to 15	- Students' obstacles in term of background knowledge.
	Statement 16 to 23	- Students' difficulties in organization and development of an argumentative essay.
	Statement 24 to 25	- Students' obstacles in term of critical thinking.

3.4.2 Interviews

The researcher also used interviews for students and teachers as another instrument to achieve the aim of the study. The interviews were designed to get specific information from both English-majored sophomores and the teachers about the students' difficulties in writing argumentative essays.

3.4.3 Interview for students

The interview for students consisted of four questions which mentioned the difficulties in writing argumentative essays. The aim of this inter was to understand the ability of English-majored sophomores in writing argumentative essays and find out the difficulties that students encounter. Students could be free to share their own opinions.

3.4.4 Interview for teachers

This interview including three questions was about the ability of English-majored sophomores in writing argumentative essays, student's problems in writing argumentative essays, and finding the biggest difficulty in the writing process through teachers' viewpoint and assessment.

3.5 Procedure

In this part, the process of implementing the research was presented. It was done within 12 weeks and the process was divided into 3 steps. The procedure of the research is listed in the following table.

Table 3. Procedure of the research

Duration (12 weeks)	Activities
From the 1 st to the 6 th week	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Correcting the research topic and submit the research proposal.- Designing the framework of the research- Designing the questionnaire and the interviews
From the 7 th to the 8 th week	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Asking teachers for the permission of delivering the questionnaire- Delivering the questionnaire to students- Interviewing the students and the teachers- Collecting the data from the questionnaire and the interviews.
From the 9 th to the 12 th week	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Analyzing the collected data from the questionnaire and the interviews.- Completing the paper.

4. Results and Discussion

Chapter 4 shows the results of the study basing on the reliable data collected from the questionnaire and the interviews. The results indicate difficulties in writing argumentative essays of English-majored sophomores through statistical evidence.

4.1 Results

After collecting all the necessary information from 90 English-majored sophomores of course 13, the data were analyzed. The results were divided into two sections which were results of the questionnaire and the results of the interviews.

4.1.1 Results of the questionnaire

The findings of the questionnaire mentioned students' background, students' attitudes towards English writing and writing argumentative essays, and difficulties in term of linguistic competence, background knowledge, organization and development of an argumentative essay, and critical thinking.

4.1.1.1 Students' background

4.1.1.1.1 Students' residences

The living environment is one of the indispensable elements which affect the studying process directly. Especially, for those who are language learners, living environment is more important. Thus, the student's level and knowledge will be determined more easily through their living environment. The figure below shows the percentage of the residences of the participants.

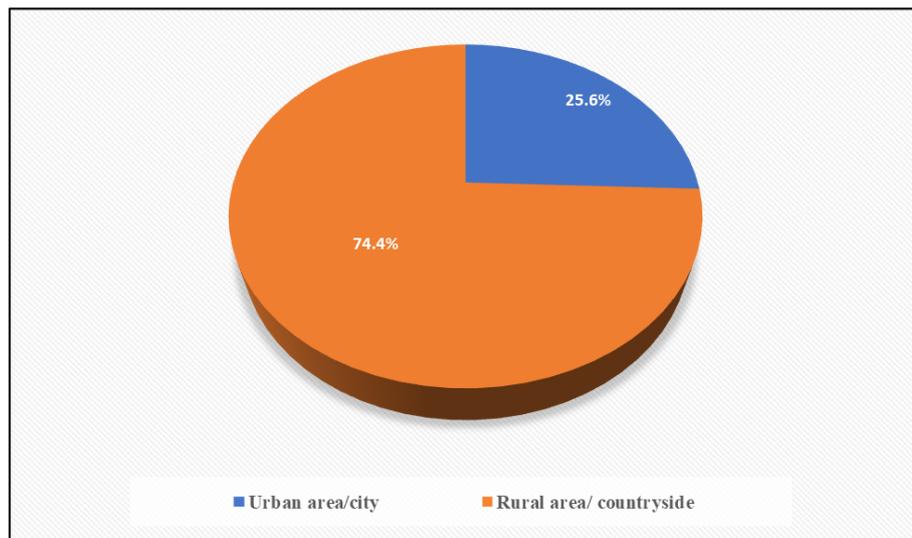


Figure 1: Participants' living environment

As can be seen from figure 1, 74.4% of students were from the countryside and only 25.6% of them came from the city. Obviously, in the countryside, learning English writing was difficult for many students because of the lack of equipment. Moreover, the teachers in the rural area mainly focused on teaching grammar and reading subjects. Therefore, it was predicted that students would have difficulties in the writing process.

4.1.1.1.2 Students' English learning years

It is very helpful to indicate level and knowledge in writing of English-majored sophomores basing on investigating the students' learning years. This table presents the participants' English learning years calculated from this year (2020).

Table 4: Participants' English learning years

Years of learning English	Percentage (%)
Less than 7 years	30%
8-9 years	28.9%
More than 10 years	41.1%

According to table 4, the highest percentage in this table was the one accounting for 41.1% of students who been learning English for more than 10 years. The remaining ones were 30% of fewer than 7 years and 28.9% of 8-9 years. That meant most of the English-majored sophomores have been studying English since primary school. Although many students had over 10 years of learning English in primary school, secondary school, and high school before going to university, this was not enough to have good writing skill because they had to learn many subjects, not only English. Besides, most of the time in English classes, teachers usually focused on teaching grammar and reading because they were very useful for the tests.

4.1.1.1.3 Students' subjects and skills at high school

When learning English, students should improve many skills together regularly so that they can use English effectively. However, most of the students often focused on learning some skills such as reading, speaking, listening skills in high school. Especially, students spent time learning grammar and reading as it was regarded to be the most useful knowledge in English tests. The table below shows the subjects and skills that a majority of students learned in high school.

Table 5: Subjects and skills that participants learned at high school

Subjects/Skills	Number
Listening	54/90
Speaking	59/90
Reading	90/90
Writing	48/90
Grammar	90/90

From Table 5, it can be shown that most of the participants learned grammar and reading at high school (90/90). The remaining skills were 59/90 of speaking, 54/90 of listening, and 48/90 of writing. In fact, there were only 48 in a total of 90 participants who learned English writing at high school. This implied that many participants would be hard to have good English writing skill because there was little time to study writing subject in high school.

4.1.1.1.4 Students' opinions about the most difficult skill

In learning English, learners must master the four skills consist of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each skill has its own difficulties. The figure below presents students' opinions about the most difficult skill in learning English.

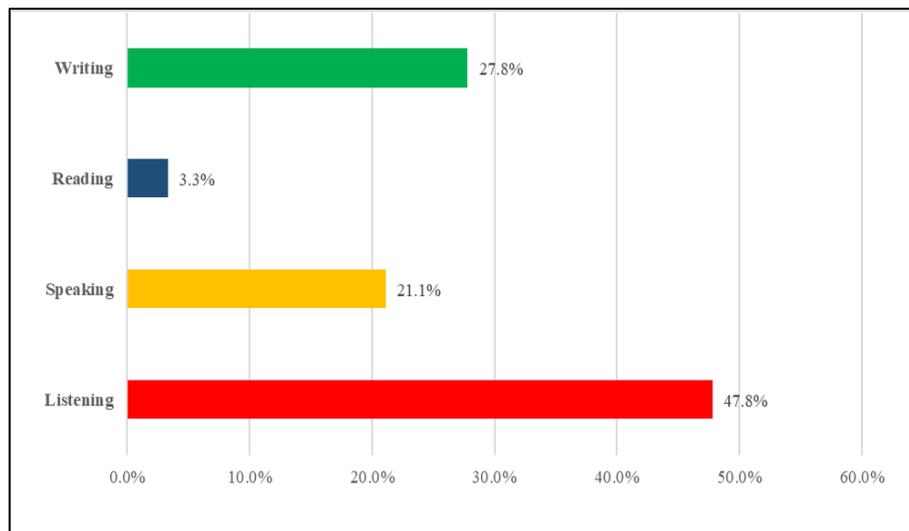


Figure 2: Participants' opinions about the most difficult skill

It can be seen from Figure 2, 47.8% of students considered listening as their most difficult skill. The other ones were writing (27.8%), speaking (21.1%), and reading (3.3%). This indicated that writing skill was the second difficult skill in learning English.

4.1.1.1.5 Students' opinions about the importance of writing skill

Good writing skill is an advantage for students who want to have good jobs in the future. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate their opinions about its importance. The following figure shows how writing skill is important to students.

From Figure 3, there was no doubt that the percentage of students who recognized the importance of writing skill was nearly 96% including 35.6% of students who chose "very important" and 60% of those who chose "important". Perhaps 3 in a total of 90 students (3.3%) did not realize the necessary role of writing skill, so they said that it was normal. The remaining ones (1.1%) selected "not important". Through these findings, we can be concluded that students were deeply aware of the importance of writing skill. Obviously, English writing is widely used in international organizations and trading for business correspondence, advertisements, job applications, and business reports. Thus, having a good English writing skill was a key to success in a career.

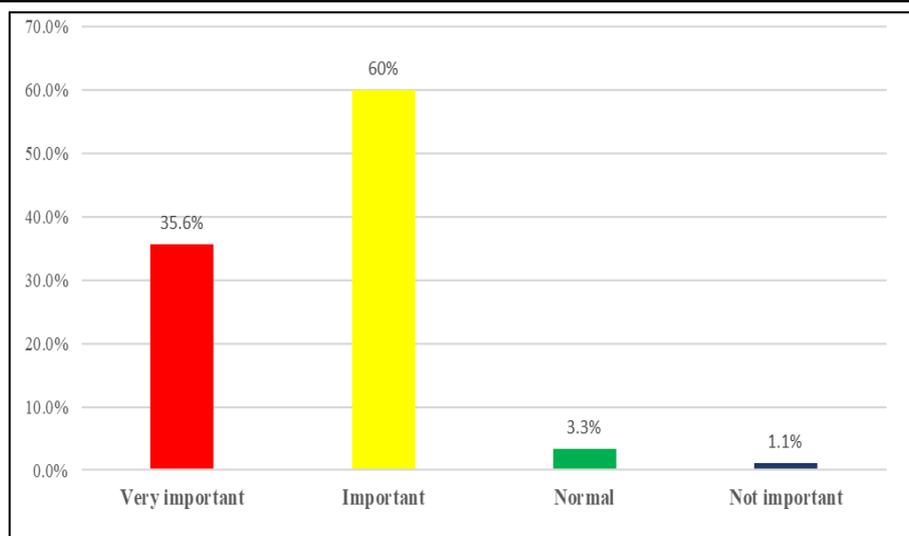


Figure 3: Participants' opinions about the importance of writing skill

4.1.1.1.6 Students' practicing writing skill

Writing is not easy for skill. Thus, to improve writing skills, students should take time to practice this skill every day. However, not everyone confirmed that they regularly practiced and the findings can be seen in Figure 4.

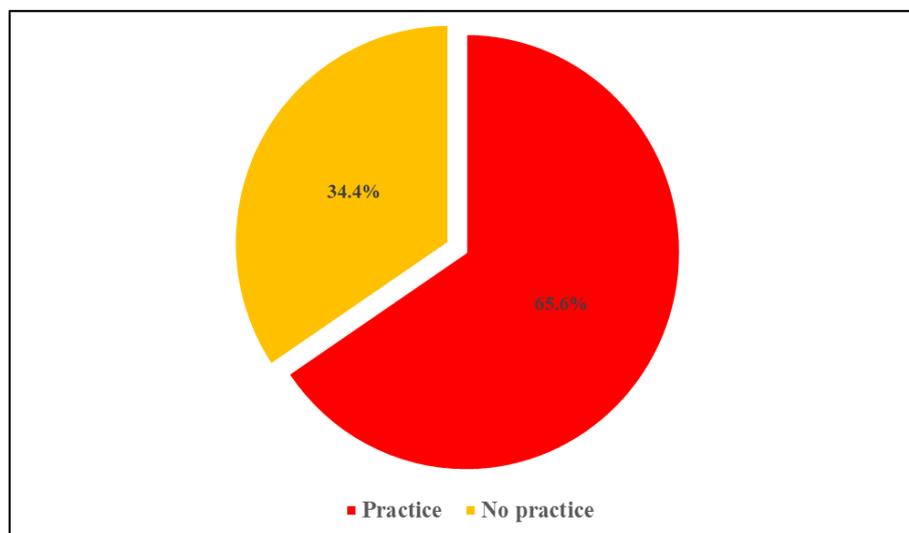


Figure 4: Participants' confirmation about practicing writing skill

Referring to Figure 4, it can be seen that 59 out of 90 students (65.6%) regularly spent their time practicing writing skill at home. It was clear that most of the students realized the importance of writing skill and they were really serious about improving their skills. In contrast, the remaining ones (34.4%) admitted that they were not diligent in practicing this skill at home.

4.1.1.1.7 Students' self-evaluation on their writing competence

Aside from receiving precious feedback from teachers, it is essential to find out how students evaluate their own writing level. Through the self-evaluation, students can realize how skillful they are and plan a better strategy to improve their skills. Figure 5 presents students' self-evaluation on their writing competence.

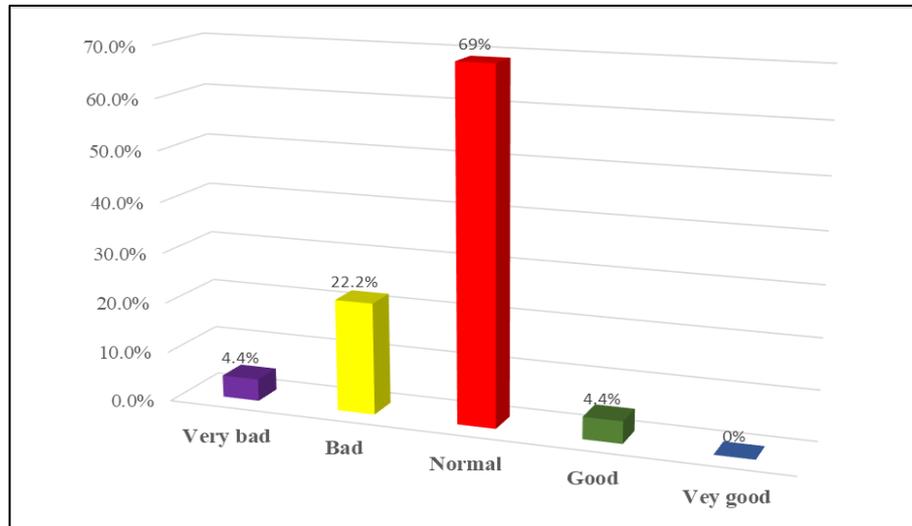


Figure 5: Participants' self-evaluation on their writing competence

From Figure 5, it can be shown that only 4.4% of participants stated that they were good at writing skill. However, 69% of students responded that their writing skill was normal and 22.2% of students admitted that they were bad at writing. Besides, the percentage of those who had very bad writing was 4.4%. No one chose "very good". These were reliable evidence providing that sophomores majoring in English had some difficulties in writing. Therefore, they had to improve their writing skills as soon as possible because writing was one of the important and integral parts of any tests or exams. Also, good writing skill would bring them more opportunities in their careers.

4.1.1.1.8 Students' opinions about writing argumentative essays

Argumentative writing is one of the most important tasks for students as they need to use it in exams or papers. Hence, students need to get insights into the nature of a written argument and help them be able to produce a quality text. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate their opinions about writing argumentative essays. The following figure shows students' opinions about writing argumentative essays.

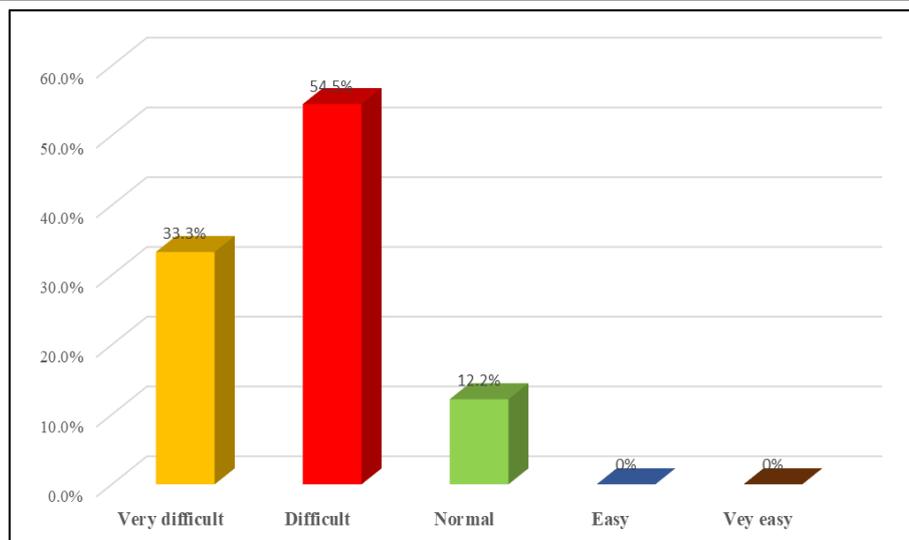


Figure 6: Participants' opinions about writing argumentative essays

It can be seen from Figure 6, 87.7% of participants consisting of 54.5% of them chose "difficult" and 33.3% of students who selected "very difficult". This implied that writing argumentative essays was a big challenge for students and they had some difficulties in writing this type. In addition, only 12.2% of students stated that writing argumentative essays were normal. The remaining opinions no one chose.

4.1.1.2 Students' difficulties in writing argumentative essays

4.1.1.2.1 Linguistic competence

4.1.1.2.1.1 Vocabulary

The first students' difficulty in term of linguistic competence is vocabulary. The results of the table including four statements are presented as follows.

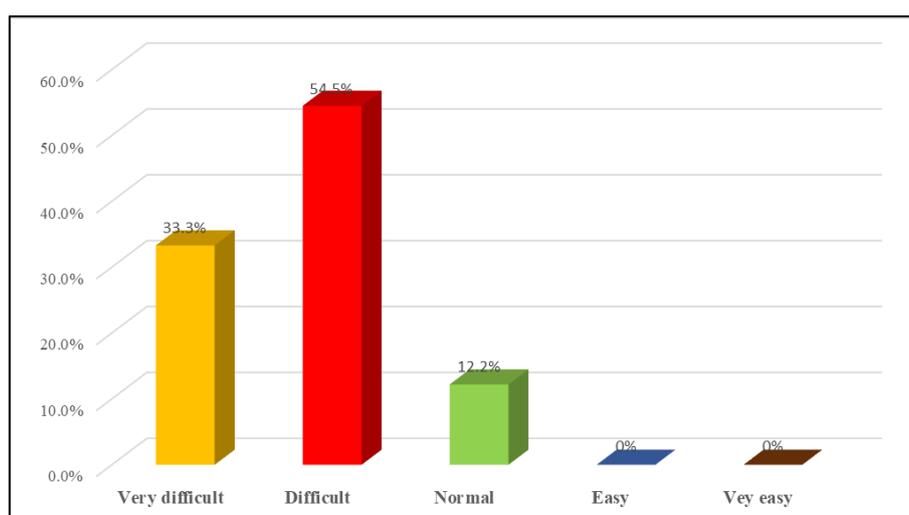


Figure 7: Participants' opinions about writing argumentative essays

From statement 1, it was clear that vocabulary was an essential tool in writing argumentative essays as 27.8% of students strongly agreed and 65.5% of them agreed

with this statement. There were only 1.1% of participants disagreed and 5.6% of them had no opinion. In statement 2, the percentage of participants who confirmed that poor vocabulary limited their writing ability was up to 90% including 31.1% strongly agreed and 58.9% agreed. There were only 4.4% of students did not agree with this statement and 5, 6% of them did not comment. In the next statement, 28.9% of participants who chose “strongly agree” and 55.5% of those who chose “agree” admitted that they could not express their ideas or opinions easily because of lacking vocabulary. There were only 15.5% of them had no comment with this statement. In statement 4, 66.6% of respondents confirmed that they did not know how to use words correctly in the suitable context while presenting (13.3% of “strongly agree”, 53.3% of “agree”). The percentages of those who disagreed and strongly disagreed with this statement were 6.7% and 1.1%, respectively. 25.6% of students selected “no idea”. In conclusion, it could be inferred that vocabulary was an obstacle to students in writing argumentative essays.

4.1.1.2.1.1.2 Grammar

Another linguistic difficulty is grammar structure. This part also includes four statements and here is the table which presents the final findings.

Table 7: Participants' problems with grammar

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5. You make mistakes about grammar in writing argumentative essays regularly.	11.1%	68.9%	15.6%	3.3%	1.1%
6. You often make a sentence without considering the grammar.	7.8%	57.7%	26.7%	5.6%	2.2%
7. You always use Google translate due to lack of grammatical knowledge.	17.8%	45.6%	22.2%	12.2%	2.2%
8. You are still using word-by-word translation, so you often make grammatical mistakes.	17.8%	53.3%	18.9%	10%	0%

Based on the responses of participants in statement 5, 11.1% of them who chose “strongly agree” and 68.9% of those who selected “agree”. These students shared that they made mistakes about grammar in writing argumentative essays regularly. Only 4.4% of them did not agree and the remaining ones (15.6%) had no comment. In statement 6, nearly 70% of respondents (7.8% strongly agreed and 57.7% agreed) confirmed that they made a sentence without considering the grammar. The percentages of those who disagreed and strongly disagreed with this statement were 5.6% and 2.2%, respectively. The remaining ones (26.7%) selected “no idea” about this issue. Next, 63.6% of students including 17.8% of “strongly agree” and 45.6% of “agree” admitted that they used Google translate due to the lack of grammatical knowledge. However, there were 12.2% of students who chose “disagree” and 2.2% of them who selected “strongly disagree”. 20 in a total of 90 students

(22.2%) shared no idea. In statement 8, 71.1% of students (17.8% totally agreed and 53.3% agreed) confirmed that they made grammatical mistakes because of using word-by-word translation. There were 18.9% of them who did not have any opinion and 10% of those who disagreed. From these four statements, it could be concluded that students still met difficulties with grammar in the writing process.

4.1.1.2.1.3 Coherence

The last students' difficulty in term of linguistic competence is coherence. The results of the table including three statements are presented as follows.

Table 8: Participants' problem with coherence

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
9. You often write without following the topic, so your writing is not clear.	15.6%	36.7%	30%	14.4%	3.3%
10. You are not able to link the ideas together in the sentences and paragraphs.	8.9%	41.1%	32.2%	17.8%	0%
11. You often use transitions in order to achieve coherence in your writing.	11.1%	55.5%	26.7%	5.6%	1.1%

From the findings of statement 9, it could be seen that 52.3% of participants including 15.6% strongly agreed and 36.7% agreed confirmed that they wrote without following the topic. However, there were 16 in a total of 90 students (17.7%) did not agree with statement 9 and the remaining ones (30%) had no idea. Next, 8.9% of students who chose "strongly agree" and 41.1% of those who selected "agree" shared that they did not able to links the ideas together in the sentences and paragraphs. Only 17.8% of them did not agree and the remaining ones (32.2%) had no comment. Lastly, only 6.7% of students including 5.6% of "disagree" and 1.1% of "strongly disagree" did not agree with statement 11 which showed that they did not use transition words in their writing. More than 60% of students concurred with this statement while 26.7% of them gave no idea. The results of these statements above proved that coherence was a major problem in student's writing.

4.1.1.2.2 Background knowledge

Background knowledge plays an important role in writing argumentative essays as it helps students manifest their opinions clearly and convincingly. The following table consisting of four statements will indicate the results of this part.

Table 9: Participants' difficulties in term of background knowledge

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
12. You cannot express your thoughts or opinions about new topics or issues because of poor background knowledge.	15.6%	54.4%	20%	10%	0%
13. You do not have enough information to express your opinions convincingly.	15.6%	54.4%	17.8%	10%	2.2%
14. The effect of mother tongue on English writing is a huge obstacle for you.	13.3%	54.4%	22.2%	7.8%	2.2%
15. The effect of mother tongue on English writing makes you often make mistakes in vocabulary, grammar structure and word order when writing.	17.8%	52.2%	21.1%	7.8%	1.1%

Based on the responses of participants in statement 12, 70% of participants agreed that they could not express their thought or opinions about new topics or issues because of poor background knowledge (15.6% strongly agreed and 54.4% agreed). 18 in a total of 90 students (20%) shared no idea while only 10% of them disagreed with the opinion. In statement 13, 15.6% of participants who chose “strongly agree” and 54.4% of those who chose “agree” admitted they did not have enough information to express their opinions convincingly. However, the participants who had the opposite thought in this statement were 11 students (12.2%) and those who did not have any idea were 16 students (17.8%). Next, 67.7% of students (13.3% strongly agreed and 54.4% agreed) confirmed that the effect of mother tongue on English writing was a huge obstacle for them. Only 10% of respondents including 7.8% of “disagree” and 2.2% of “strongly disagree” had the opposite idea. 22.2% of them did not have any opinion. Analyzing from data in the last statement showed that about 70% of participants consisting of 17.8% strongly agreed and 52.2% agreed shared that they made mistakes in vocabulary, grammar structure, and word order when writing due to the effect of mother tongue. The percentages of those who disagreed and strongly disagreed with this statement were 7.8% and 1.1%, respectively. The remaining ones (21%) selected “no idea”. Therefore, it could be concluded that students could not express their opinions convincingly without background knowledge. Besides, they are strongly affected by the mother tongue in English writing.

4.1.1.2.3 Organization and development of an argumentative essay

A big issue in writing argumentative essays is that students do not understand the organization and development of an argumentative essay. The results including eight statements are presented as follows.

Table 10: Participants' difficulties in organization and development of an argumentative essay

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
16. You do not know how to make an outline for an argumentative essay.	11.1%	37.8%	38.9%	11.1%	1.1%
17. You are not able to write a clear, understandable and strong thesis statement.	12.2%	41.1%	32.2%	13.3%	1.1%
18. You do not often provide enough proof or evidence to clarify your arguments.	16.7%	50%	22.2%	10%	1.1%
19. You find it difficult to brainstorm ideas for your writing.	15.6%	53.3%	16.7%	14.4%	0%
20. You cannot develop ideas and do not know how to organize them properly.	11.1%	47.8%	30%	10%	1.1%
21. You often have difficulty in writing counterarguments.	18.9%	52.2%	20%	6.7%	2.2%
22. You do not often provide opposing arguments, even ignoring it.	14.4%	47.7%	25.6%	12.2%	0%
23. In the concluding section, you do not often restate the thesis statement clearly.	11.1%	57.8%	21.1%	10%	0%

The first statement in this table stated that students did not know how to make an outline for an argumentative essay. 12.2% of them (11.1% disagreed and 1.1% totally disagreed) did not agree with this statement which showed that they knew how to make an outline for an argumentative essay. However, nearly 49% of students concurred with this statement while 38.9% of them gave no idea. Next, the percentage of participants who confirmed that they were not able to write a clear, understandable and strong thesis statement was up to 53.3% including 12.2% strongly agreed and 41.1% agreed. There was only 13.3% of them who chose "disagree" and 1.1% of those who chose "strongly disagree" did not accord with statement 17. The remaining students (32.2%) shared no opinion. In statement 18, 66.7% of participants stated that they did not provide enough proof or evidence to clarify their arguments (16.7% strongly agreed and 50% agreed). The percentages of those who disagreed and strongly agreed with this statement were 10% and 1.1%, respectively. The remaining ones (22.2%) selected "no idea". In statement 19, 15.6% of participants who chose "strongly agree" and 53.3% of those who selected "agree" shared that they found it difficult to brainstorm ideas for their writing. Only 14.4% of them did not agree and the remaining ones (16.7%) had no comment. In statement 20, 58.9% of respondents admitted that they could not develop ideas and did not know to organize them properly (11.1% of "strongly agree" and 47.8% of "agree"). The percentages of those who disagreed and strongly agreed with this statement were 10% and 1.1%, respectively. The other ones (30%) selected "no idea". In statement 21, more than 70% of students agreed that they had difficulty in writing counterarguments (17.8%

strongly agreed and 52.2 % agreed) while only 8.9% of students did not agree with this statement. There were 18 in a total of 90 students (20%) who shared no opinion. In statement 22, 62.2% of participants confirmed that they did not provide opposing arguments, even ignoring it. There were 25.6% of students who shared no idea and 12.2% of those who disagreed with this statement. Analyzing from data in the last statement showed that about 68.9% of participants consisting of 11.1% strongly agreed and 57.8% agreed shared that they did not restate the thesis statement clearly in the concluding section. However, there were only 10% of students did not agree with this statement, and the remaining ones (21.1%) selected “no idea”. In short, the results of these statements proved that students had some problems with organizing and developing ideas.

4.1.1.2.4 Critical thinking

It is undeniable that the significant role of critical thinking skills in writing argumentative essays. It helps students analyze, organize and present logical ideas to convince the readers. However, it is not easy for students to develop critical thinking skills, especially applying this skill to produce the quality of an argumentative essay. This part has two statements and the results are shown in the following table.

Table 11: Participants’ obstacles in term of critical thinking

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
24. Critical thinking is an important and indispensable factor in writing argumentative essays.	24.4%	57.8%	11.1%	6.7%	0%
25. Your writing is boring due to a lack of critical thinking.	21.1%	47.8%	25.6%	5.6%	0%

As can be seen from statement 24, more than 80% of participants agreed that critical thinking was an important and indispensable factor in writing argumentative essays (24.4% strongly agreed and 57.8% agreed). There were only 6.7% of participants disagreed and 11.1% of them had no opinion. In statement 25, 21.1% of them who chose “strongly agree” and 47.8% of those who selected “agree” shared that lack of critical thinking to make their writing was boring. Only 5.6% of them did not agree and the remaining ones (25.6%) had no comment. In brief, it could be indicated that critical thinking was a key factor leading to success in writing argumentative essays. Still, students were the lack of critical thinking skills in the writing process.

4.1.2 Results of the interviews

4.1.2.1 Interview for students

After analyzing the interview of sixteen sophomores carefully, the researcher got the final results which were in accord with the results of the questionnaire. The answers of the first question “*What do you think about argumentative essays?*” were nearly similar when all of the participants joining in interview thought that argumentative essay was a formal

piece of writing. It presented their opinion on a topic, which must be stated clearly, giving various viewpoints on the topic supported by reasons and examples. Additionally, 12 in a total of 16 participants stated that argumentative essay was an opinion essay and it was very difficult with them. Only 4 students indicated that argumentative essay was easy to write.

Next, when asked which part students thought was the most difficult in an argumentative essay, 12 participants chose the body part. They explained that the body was the most difficult part because they did not know how to write the topic sentences and they could not find out supporting ideas for the topic sentences easily. In addition, they did not know how to organize supporting ideas and give examples correctly and logically. 3 students chose the introduction part because they could not write a good hook sentence to attract the readers' attention. Besides, they spent too much time to think and write the thesis statement clearly. Only one student selected the conclusion because it was not easy to summarize the main ideas discussed in the body and restate the thesis statement.

In the third question "*Do you have any difficulties in writing argumentative essays? What are they?*" all of the students affirmed that they met difficulties in writing argumentative essays. Some students' common difficulties were lack of vocabulary, problems about grammar, transitions, and connecting words, not finding out reasons and supporting arguments, and lack of background knowledge to present opposing arguments and refute it. Besides, only a minority of students shared that due to lack of critical thinking skills such as analyze facts, generate and organize ideas, defend opinions, draw inferences, evaluate arguments and solve problems, so their writing was boring and not convince the readers. They confirmed that their critical thinking ability was low; hence, they often met difficulty in writing counterarguments.

Most importantly, from the findings of the last question "*In your opinion, what is the biggest difficulty in writing argumentative essays?*" It could be seen that the biggest difficulty of each student was different. Six students admitted that writing a counterargument paragraph was the biggest difficulty for them. In addition, there were 5 students having other opinions that poor linguistic competence and lack of background knowledge were the biggest difficulty in writing argumentative essays. The remaining ones confirmed that organizing ideas were their main problem.

4.1.2.2 Interview for teachers

Aside from the results of the students' interview, the researcher also analyzed the findings of the teachers' interview with two teachers who taught the students writing skills and academic subjects. Firstly, when asked about the ability of English-majored sophomores in writing argumentative essays, two teachers had different assessments of the students' writing ability. The first teacher evaluated that the students' writing ability was good. However, the second teacher rated the opposite. This implied that the writing ability of students was unequal and different among classes. In the second question, when being asked about the difficulties that their students usually met in writing an argumentative essay, the teachers said that the students faced some difficulties such as

poor ideas, not knowing how to organize ideas, the lack of vocabulary and connecting words, and problems about grammar. Finally, the first teacher said that writing a counterargument paragraph was the biggest difficulty in argumentative essays. The second teacher believed that their main problem was the fact that students do not know how to explore and organize ideas.

4.2 Discussion

In this section, the researcher would like to interpret and describe the importance of the findings which have been presented in the result section. Specifically, this section includes two parts: discussion about students' background and discussion about students' difficulties in writing argumentative essays.

4.2.1 Discussion about students' background

Based on the students' responses in the questionnaire, it was revealed that about 74.4% of English-majored sophomores (course 13) came from the countryside. This was a disadvantage because of the lack of equipment and condition. Thus, it was very hard for them to have chances to improve their English writing ability. Meanwhile, although many students confirmed that they had about 10 years of learning English at primary school, secondary school, high school, and university, it could not be enough for them to have good writing ability for presenting an argumentative essay because writing skill was not taught much. Furthermore, most of the time in English classes spent on focusing on grammar and reading comprehension because they were very important to pass the tests and examinations. This was the reason why only 48 out of 90 students learned writing in high school.

Although they had little time or even had hardly learned this skill before entering university, only 27.8% of students agreed that writing was the most difficult skill. A majority of students affirmed that writing English skills were important for their learning and working. Next, nearly 65.6% of students confirmed that they spent the time practicing writing skills at home. Nevertheless, when being asked to evaluate their writing competence, 62 in a total of 90 students admitted that their writing level was normal. Meanwhile, one out of two teachers interviewed evaluated that the writing ability of English-majored sophomores was not good. More importantly, through the findings in the questionnaire and interviews, most of the students confirmed that writing argumentative essays was very difficult. Therefore, it indicated that the writing ability of English-majored sophomores was unequal and different among classes. Also, students were unaware of their writing competence as well as realize their weakness in learning writing subject. Consequently, they usually got difficulties in the English writing process.

4.2.2 Discussion about students' difficulties in writing argumentative essays

The findings from analyzing the necessary information of the questionnaire and interviews showed that writing argumentative essays were not easy and most of the students usually met problems in writing argumentative essays. The five students'

obstacles were linguistic competence, background knowledge, organization and development of an argumentative essay, and lack of critical thinking skills.

The first students' problem in writing an argumentative essay is linguistic competence including vocabulary, grammar, and coherence. 5/16 answers of the students' interview confirmed that poor linguistic competence was the biggest difficulty for them in writing argumentative essays. First of all, vocabulary was the biggest problem for students because most of the students did not have good knowledge of vocabulary, and they found it hard to express their ideas and opinions without having enough vocabulary. Moreover, they did not know how to use words correctly in the context. Next, grammar was one of the top students' concerns. They often make a sentence without considering the grammar. Especially, they often made grammatical mistakes because they used Google translate or word-by-word translation. The reason leading these problems was that students did not catch grammar's rules and lack of grammatical knowledge.

Truly, these findings were in line with the results of Ka-kan-dee and Kaur (2014), which indicated that vocabulary and grammar structure were prominent barriers in writing argumentative essays of Thai EFL English major students. Finally, some students admitted that coherence was a great hurdle for them when they wanted to produce the quality of an argumentative essay. They were not able to link the ideas together in the sentences and paragraphs. In addition, they often wrote without following the topic, so their writing was not clear. Similarly, Pilus (1996) also pointed out in his research "*incoherence is recurring the problem in the students' writing and can be a major obstacle to their success in writing classes*". Still, most of the students shared that they often used transition words in order to achieve coherence in their writing.

Background knowledge is the second problem for students. Indeed, many students could not express their thoughts or opinions about new topics or issues because of poor background knowledge. They also did not have enough information to express their opinions convincingly (over 90% of the respondents in the questionnaire said that they had problems about background knowledge and 5/16 answers of the students' interview confirmed that lack of background knowledge was the biggest difficulty for them). As Knudon (1992) emphasized that "*a lack of background knowledge will result in student's making unsupported claims that may or may not be logical connected to the proposition, warrant, or opposition*" (p.176). More importantly, they often made mistakes in vocabulary, grammar structure, and word order when writing because of the effect of mother tongue on English writing. This showed that the native language has strongly influenced students' thinking and writing style.

Next, the organization and development of an argumentative essay are one of the problems in the writing process. Some students had difficulty in the present each part of an argumentative essay. This reason leading this problem was that students were not deeply aware of the nature of argumentative essays. Some students were not able to write a clear thesis statement (nearly 54% of students in the questionnaire agreed with this problem). Some of the students in the questionnaire and interview agreed that they found it difficult to brainstorm ideas for their writing. Furthermore, they could not find out

supporting ideas for the topic sentences easily, and they did not know how to organize the supporting ideas and give examples correctly and logically. In addition, some students found it hard to write a counterargument paragraph (around 71% participants of the questionnaire and 6/16 respondents in the interview agreed with this problem, and one out of two answers of the teachers' interview claimed that writing a counterargument paragraph was the biggest difficulty for students). In brief, the results mentioned above were in harmony with the findings of Zhu (2001), which revealed that organization and development of arguments were major challenges that the students encountered in writing their argumentative written work.

The last students' difficulty is critical thinking. Some of the students recognized that critical thinking was an important and indispensable factor in writing argumentative essays. Khunaifi (2015) added that "*critical thinking training has a positive impact on students' argumentative essay writing skills*". Nevertheless, due to a lack of critical thinking, their writing was boring. They shared that they did not have the ability to analyze facts, generate and organize ideas, defend opinions, make comparisons, draw inferences, evaluate arguments and solve problems. Additionally, some students reported that their critical thinking was low. The reason leading this problem was that students gathered the information, arguments, and evidence without evaluating and assessing properly. Furthermore, because of the lack of critical thinking skills, they had difficulty in presenting an opposing viewpoint.

5. Conclusion, Implications, Limitations and Recommendations

Chapter 5 contains a conclusion, implications, limitations, and some recommendations for further research.

5.1 Conclusion

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the research is conducted to aim at finding out the difficulties in writing argumentative essays of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University. Besides, this study is expected that students could restrict their difficulties and improve their writing skill positively. After carrying out this research by analyzing the precious information from the questionnaire and the interviews, the researcher could make a conclusion that English-majored sophomores met some difficulties in writing argumentative essays. The researcher finally figured out the most influential factors in the writing process. Those factors were difficulties in linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar, and coherence), background knowledge, organization and development of an argumentative essay, and lack of critical thinking.

It could be seen that difficulties of linguistic competence and background knowledge were the big obstacles that students faced in writing argumentative essays the most. To overcome these problems, the students need to read news, books, literature review in English, and necessary information on the Internet not only to widen their general knowledge but also to enlarge their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar as

well as understand English styles. More importantly, the organization and development of an argumentative essay have confirmed its influence on the students' writing argumentative essays. They have to understand the structure of an argumentative essay. In addition, students should apply mind-mapping, tree diagram and linear outline to analyze and develop ideas as well as organize them properly. Last but not least, critical thinking had an undeniable role in students' writing process, it affected greatly to the success of their writing. Therefore, the students have to think critically towards the topic and present logical reasons for the arguments they write. Moreover, they should spend more time practicing writing skill at home because it helped them develop critical thinking skills. In general, investigating the difficulties in writing argumentative essays was a useful way to help English majored sophomores realize their weaknesses in the writing process. From these mentioned problems, they could propose appropriate resolutions to improve the quality of their argumentative essays effectively and positively.

5.2 Implications

The analyzed findings from the questionnaire and interviews indicated that most of the participants of this study recognized the significant role of writing skills in studying and working. Moreover, English-majored sophomores had the awareness of their difficulties in writing argumentative essays. The findings of the research revealed that students encountered many problems in writing argumentative essays related to linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar, and coherence), background knowledge, organization and development of an argumentative essay, and lack of critical thinking. The researcher expected that the students realize their weak points so that they can find out appropriate and effective solutions to overcome these difficulties as well as improve their English writing ability. Additionally, this study is also useful for teachers who want to know the difficulties that their students usually encounter. Consequently, they can offer their students some advice and solutions that help them overcome the mentioned obstacles and improve their English writing ability.

5.3 Limitations

Despite being instructed and supported enthusiastically by the supervisor and friends, there were some limitations. In fact, this was the first time that the researcher conducted a study like this; thereby, it was hard to avoid some mistakes. First of all, due to the outbreak of the Corona-virus epidemic, the researcher conducted an online survey of three classes of English-majored sophomores. However, only 16 students participated in the online survey and most of them lacked enthusiasm and non-cooperation when the researcher delivered the online survey for them. As a result, the online survey was unsuccessful. Next, the researcher delivered the questionnaire to all of the students (90/90), a minority of them did not finish it wholeheartedly. Furthermore, just 5 out of 16 interviewees shared full information while the remaining ones only gave short and general ideas. For this reason, the researcher found it hard to choose correct and

necessary information for this study. Especially, the instrument of this study was the questionnaire and interview, so the result could be limited. This affected the reliability of the research.

5.4 Recommendations

This research can be seen as a basis for further research in the future. Firstly, the researcher already completed the work of finding out some difficulties in writing argumentative essays of English-majored sophomores; therefore, it is expected that another study about how to overcome these difficulties or how to develop critical thinking skills through writing argumentative essays should be conducted to help students produce their argumentative text successfully. Secondly, this present study was conducted with the descriptive approach, the result could be limited. Therefore, it might be a good idea to do the same research with the experimental approach. Finally, based on the results of this study, other research should be broadened in term of the population consisting of both English majored students and non-English majored ones.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: Questionnaire for Students

Dear friends,

My name is Tra To Quyen and I am currently a senior majoring in English. I am very grateful to you for spending your valuable time on helping me. Now I am carrying out research entitled "**A study on the difficulties in writing argumentative essays of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University**". This is the questionnaire used to collect the necessary information from you, so please take your time to finish the below questions carefully because your answers are very important and helpful to my research. Your personal information will be kept secretly. Thank you for your cooperation.

Student's full name: Age:

Class: Gender: Male Female

A.

Please read the following questions and circle the appropriate answer(s) for each question. Give specific answers if needed.

1. Where do you come from?

- a. Urban area/ city
- b. Rural area/ countryside

2. How long have you learned English?..... years

3. Which skill did you learn when you were at high school?

- a. Listening
- b. Speaking
- c. Reading
- d. Writing
- e. Grammar

4. In your opinion, which skill is the most difficult?

- a. Listening
- b. Speaking
- c. Reading
- d. Writing

5. What do you think about the importance of writing skill?

- a. Very important
- b. Important
- c. Normal
- d. Not important

6. Do you take your time to practice your writing skill at home?

- a. Yes
- b. No

7. How do you evaluate your writing competence?

- a. Very bad
- b. Bad
- c. Normal
- d. Good
- e. Very good

8. How do you think about writing argumentative essays?

- a. Very difficult
- b. Difficult
- c. Normal
- d. Easy
- e. Very easy

B.

Please read the following statements and mark (×) in the suitable column to express your opinions.

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Vocabulary is an essential tool in writing argumentative essays					
2. Poor vocabulary limits your writing ability					
3. You cannot express your ideas/opinions easily because of lacking vocabulary.					
4. You do not know how to use words correctly in the context when you write.					
5. You make mistakes about grammar in writing argumentative essays regularly.					
6. You often make a sentence without considering the grammar					
7. You always use Google translate due to lack of grammatical knowledge.					
8. You are still using word-by-word translation, so you often make grammatical mistakes.					
9. You often write without following the topic, so your writing is not clear.					
10. You are not able to link the ideas together in the sentences and paragraphs.					

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11. You often use transitions in order to achieve coherence in your writing.					
12. You cannot express your thoughts or opinions about new topics or issues because of poor background knowledge.					
13. You do not have enough information to express your opinions convincingly.					
14. The effect of mother tongue on English writing is a huge obstacle for you.					
15. The effect of mother tongue on English writing makes you often make mistakes in vocabulary, grammar structure and word order when writing.					
16. You do not know how to make an outline for an argumentative essay.					
17. You are not able to write a clear, understandable and strong thesis statement.					
18. You do not often provide enough proof or evidence to clarify your arguments.					
19. You find it difficult to brainstorm ideas for your writing.					
20. You cannot develop ideas and do not know how to organize them properly.					
21. You often have difficulty in writing counterarguments.					
22. You do not often provide opposing arguments, even ignoring it.					
23. In the concluding section, you do not often restate the thesis statement clearly.					
24. Critical thinking is an important and indispensable factor in writing argumentative essays.					
25. Your writing is boring due to lack of critical thinking.					

Thanks for Your Help!

Appendix B: Students' Interview Questions

Dear friends,

My name is Tra To Quyen and I am currently a senior majoring in English. Now I am carrying out a research entitled "A study on the difficulties in writing argumentative essays of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University". I will be very much appreciating if you can take your precious time to answer these following questions. Your responses are very important and helpful to my research. Your personal information will be kept confidential. Thank you so much!

Student's full name: Age:

Class: Gender: Male Female

1. What do you think about argumentative essays?

.....
.....
.....
.....

2. In your opinion, which part is the most difficult in an argumentative essay? Why?

.....
.....
.....
.....

3. Do you have any difficulties in writing argumentative essays? What are they?

.....
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.....
.....

4. In your opinion, what is the biggest difficulty in writing argumentative essays?

.....
.....
.....
.....

Thanks for Your Help!

Appendix C: Teachers' Interview Questions

Dear teachers,

*My name is Tra To Quyen and I am currently a senior majoring in English. I am very grateful to you for spending your valuable time on helping me. Now I am carrying out a research entitled "**A study on the difficulties in writing argumentative essays of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University**". Please take your time to answer all below questions carefully. Your responses are very important and helpful to my research. Thank you so much!*

1. How do you evaluate English-majored sophomores' ability of writing argumentative essays?

.....
.....
.....

2. What difficulties do your students usually meet in writing argumentative essays?

.....
.....
.....

3. In your opinion, what is the biggest difficulty in writing argumentative essays?

.....
.....
.....

Thanks for Your Help!

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